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ABSTRACT

This paper illuminates the physiological, socio-cultural, and linguistic obstacles which occur due to the interaction between American Indian cultures and the Anglo educational system and which make the identification of gifted and talented American Indian children difficult. It demonstrates the need for more culturally appropriate ways of identifying such children. The use of measures based on community definitions of giftedness and talent rather than the traditional standardized measures is recommended. An approach to developing a "generic" list of characteristics and a set of measuring instruments which can be adapted by most American Indian groups for use in identification and programming is discussed. A design called "Process Approach for Creating Instructional Materials for American Indian Children" (Baca et al., 1984) is offered as a theoretical model of curriculum development which can be adapted and used in conjunction with the generic characteristic checklist and identification measures. Responsibility for developments and changes is directed to local educational agencies and, especially, the communities that would be directly affected by them. Twenty references are cited in the bibliography. (Author/NEC)

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AMERICAN INDIAN GIFTED CHILDREN: FINDING THEM

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ABSTRACT

The physiological, socio-cultural and linguistic obstacles which occur due to the interaction between American Indian cultures and the Anglo educational system and which make the identification of gifted and talented American Indian children difficult are illuminated. The need for more culturally appropriate ways of identifying American Indian gifted and talented children is demonstrated. Author recommends the use of measures based on community definitions of giftedness and talent rather than the traditional standardized measures. An approach to develop a "generic" list of characteristics and set of measuring instruments which can be adapted by most American Indian groups for use in identification and programming is discussed. A Process Approach for Creating Instructional Materials for American Indian Children (Baca, et.al.,1984) is provided as a theoretical model of curriculum development which can be adapted and used in conjunction with the generic characteristic checklist and identification measures.

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AMERICAN INDIAN GIFTED CHILDREN: FINDING THEM

A limited amount of research on American Indian"gifted and talented" children exists . A small number of actual programs for these students can be found.

In this paper the author asserts that one of the primary reasons that this type of education for the American Indian rarely has been successful is due to program design andimplementation based on mainstream society criteria of gifted and talented (G/T) , i.e. based on dominant society characteristics of intelligence and creativity. The instruments used for measuring these characteristics- usually defined per the United States Office of Education (USOE) definition of gifted and talented (Marland,1972)-are also culpable, in part, for the general lack of success that these progams encounter .The author suggests that the USOE definition is inappropriate for American Indian exceptional students and education based on this definition is possibly even detrimental for the education of these students. Therefore a change must be made in how American Indian exceptional students are identified and resultantly in how programs are designed. It must be noted that educational programs cannot be discussed independent of the criteion upon which they are based.

The three questions addressed here will be first, 'Is there a need for the development of an alternative set of characteristics and related identification instruments used to identify American Indian exceptional students ?' Second, 'If so,how can such a set of characteristics be developed?' Finally, 'How can such characteristics and instruments be used to develop appropriate educational programs for American Indian exceptional children?'.

'IS THERE A NEED?'

In searching the literature,a limited amount of information was found concerning the topic American Indian gifted and talented. Further reading on and exposure to the effects of acculturation on American Indian populations has served to reinforce the author's contention that American Indian populations have been inappropriately served by the U.S. Department of Education through the Bureau of Indian Affairs and other federally supported programs. The philosophy of education, as presented to the American Indian, has been in opposition to that of their communities' culture, language and interpersonal relations (Downs, 1972; Dozier,1966; Durr,1964; Gonzales, 1974; Mercer,1977; Wax and Wax, 1970).

Some issues, not addressed or addressed in a limited manner by those who influence Indian education, include the hearing problems of many Native Americans and Alaska natives due to otitis media (a middle ear disease) and the resultant confounding of language development because of hearing problems. The unusual dialects (e.g. pigins) that result from the mixing of an Indian language with English. Yet another issue is that of the learning styles of Indian children which are quite different in many respects from those of Anglo children. These issues need to be addressed in Indian education . These and other issues affect the "low achieving" , "average" and "high achieving" children in American Indian communities equally. It is possible that exceptional American Indian children are more sensitive to many of the issues affecting themselves and their education. This sensitivity may evolve into a social/psychological obstacle which prevents these children from reaching their fullest potential.

There are currently a wide variety of measures used to identify gifted and talented children. Most of these are based on the traditonal definition of gifted or talented children. Some are less culture bound

than others (e.g.Mercers SOMPA -System of Multicultural and Pluralistic Assessment). Some test 'only' creativity and some test that amorphous quality "the I.Q.". It is important to note that the majority of instruments used have been normed on -and, therefore, designed to measure- primarily Anglo-middle-class children. Clearly, by definition of norm, these instruments were not created to measure American Indian children (and rarely any other minority).

The deceptive ease with which these instruments can be used often clouds the fact that success on these measures is limited to those who can perform according to the standards of the measures. Ethnic and community characteristics tend to be overlooked. It is, therefore, reasonable to suspect that many American Indian children, who have much to offer their communities in terms of ceativity, talent and /or academic abilities, are rarely identified. Resultantly, their strengths are often left un-tapped and un-served in the school system.

One of the principal problems in using standardized measures to identify gifted and talented children from minority groups is that the set of charateristics they purport to measure may be vastly different from group to group, as noted above. Thus, labeling by comparison, which is what one does when one compares actual scores with norm scores, has a detrimental effect on the eduction of children who do not fit those norms by indicating that the child needs remedial services for learning disabilities, for example, instead of needed G/T services Inappropriate labeling thus clouds the real educational needs of the American Indian G/T child (Baca & Cervantes,1984; Frasier,1983; Gallagher,1974.)

From the above, two suggestions for the development of identification characteristics and assessment measures for American Indian exceptional children are presented. First, the measures should be developed, or, at least, chosen by those persons (parents, community members, and even children) who are most affected by their use (Bernal,1978; Torrance,1977) and second, (actually, the precursor of the first) that the characteristics used in the selection or creation of such measures are directly applicable to those persons being measured. This is not to say it will take little time and be easy to do. It will not. Time and effort are needed to create quality education for any group of children.

An article by Anderson and Anderson (1983) and a collection of papers presented at the Gifted and Talented American Indian Consortium (1978) make the issue clear. The contributors emphatically state the need for the development of gifted and talented progams for American Indian populations which are relevant to the characteristics and needs of these populations. Baca, et.al. (1984) and Peacock (1978) make the point that there are no 'typical' American Indian cultures or languages. In addition, the existing American Indian programs for gifted and talented address educational concerns for the Native American from a Euro-American point of view which is highly inappropriate for American Indian children.

The Granite Title VII Project Report (1982) addressed this issue ,as well , in stating that "...It is necessary to transcend cultural and educational biases in order to identify giftedness in areas indigenous to the CULTURE OF THE STUDENT (emphasis added)."(p. J32)

DEVELOPING A SET OF CHARACTERISTICS AND ASSOCIATED MEASURING INSTRUMENTS

The approach is set up into three levels, two of which will be addressed in this section.

Level one is the creation of a "generic"profile of gifted

and talented characteristics from the American Indian point of view as defined by related literature and surveys. After a needs survey of a community that wants to develop a profile characteristics can be "plugged in" that the community believes would be most appropriate to their cultural milieu. This could be accomplished by a survey of educators, administrators , parents and community members who work with and live directly in a given Indian community.

One would anticipate that there are many pupil characteristics in common with those currently used by gifted and talented programs (Gallagher,1974). It is also anticipated that there would be certain pupil characteristics that are critically different and unique to Indian communities. These unique characteristics can be incorporated into defintions of G/T appropriate to the individual communities as well as into the development of individual programs for American Indian "gifted and talented" children.

Some examples of Indian pupil characteristics that differ from the mainstream culture have been identified by Anderson and Anderson (1983): 1) valuing of cooperation over competition, 2) avoiding public recognition, 3) producing a lower level of language in Anglo-dominated classroom settings, 4) valuing individual autonomy, 5) refusing to defend oneself against accusations made by authority figures, 6) responding to authority figures by looking down or away, and 7) valuing orientation toward the present rather than the future. Low levels of language production (number 3) is a major cause of under-representation of American Indian children in programs for the "gifted and talented" (Gallagher,et.al, 1974; Mercer, 1973; Spolsky, 1972). Very similar problems are currently issues among Hispanic (Bernal, 1978) and Black (Torrance, 1977) youth in our nation, as well. The differences in all cases are due to the variety of culutural definitions of "gifted and talented".

The second level, or study, is the development of an appropriate set of assessment instruments based on the list of characteristics developed by a community.

Most school districts which have minority programs for gifted and talented recognize the need to adapt and/or modify existing identification measures to meet the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse children. Most have instruments such as checklists and measures of intelligence which are purportedly used together in a gestalt to identify the exceptional children for whom they are looking. When used with the recognition of the inherent limitations of such instruments, such a group of measuring instruments can indeed provide a reliable method of identifying minority 'gifted and talented' students. However, there exists the residual or borderline group who are not identified due to linguistic, cultural, and/or economic limitations. In order to draw in the borderline group effectively the measures used to identify these students should be directly related to the characteristics that are most associated with the exceptional children in question.

In the development of a comprehensive checklist of measures caution should be made concerning the use of psychometric measures. Much research has demonstrated the inapplicability and unreliability of such instruments for culturally different populations. Even when the mean standard error is lowered by one standard deviation for such populations it is an indication of the fact that the original measure was not applicable to the minority population for which it was altered. (Tymitz, 1983; Rodriguez, et.al, 1981; Locke, 1978; Downs, 1972; Chambers, et.al, 1980). Durr (1964) and Gallagher, et.al.,(1974) also point out that psychometric, as well as most standardized achievement tests, assume that the results are the students' BEST effort and that, ultimately, these measures

seriously limit opportunities for gifted underachievers- a category into which many Indian children may fall.

There exist numerous measuring instruments which can be compiled into a comprehensive list to be used by local education agencies (LEA's) in order to identify exceptional Indian children. This list would be available to any interested LEA's and would provide them with an informed choice so that they may select the most approptiate measures for the community needs. It may be that no instrument would be suitable for a particular community. In this case, there are checklists or surveys that can be designed by LEA's to meet their specific needs and which are not standardized .

It is important for us as educators, especially when we are looking for the "perfect measuring instrument", to recognize a statement made by William Durr in his book The Gifted Student (1964), "Evaluating instruments have not yet reached the stage where any single [instrument] is infallible." (p.17) This statement is surely as applicable today as it was in 1964.

USING CHARACTERISTICS AND MEASURES TO DEVELOP APPROPRIATE EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS FOR NATIVE AMERICAN EXCEPTIONAL CHILDREN

It is important to remember that there must always be an educatonal goal in order to make use of levels one and two above. This reality emphasizes the cyclical nature of programming for and identification of "gifted and talented" children (Perrone,et al.,1978). For example,one would only search for students who were exceptional in math or science if that is the focal program area and likewise for dance or music.

The third level will take a look at the programmatic and instructional aspects of education for "gifted and talented" American Indian children.

A possible generic model for programming is the Process Approach- A Process Approach for Creating Instructional Materials for American Indian Children (Baca, et.al,1984). At this point the materials are arranged for general curriculum. However, this design can be augmented , if needed, and revised to provide a curriculum model for the education of exceptional American Indians. This model provides guidelines within which an LEA can make choices according to the particular needs and characteristics of a community.

With a strong curriculum design the next step would be to determine the use of instructional strategies most fitting to curricular needs - e.g pull-out, resource room, extracurricular instruction, etc. (Olson, 1985). Some of these instructional strategies may not be appropriate to the needs of an Indian community and may constitute a social/behavioral anomaly as well, hence, the mode of learning is directly opposed, culturally and socially, to that of a particular Indian community. This would lead to another study of what type of instructional strategies would be most beneficial to American Indian exceptional children.

In summary, the need of addressing the issue of American Indian exceptional (G/T) children in education is clear. With effort it would be possible to create a "generic" profile of characteristics and base the use of identification measures on these characteristics. The most important facet in addressing the needs of these children is.

what the curricular and instructional goals of the educational programs are and how they can be set-up to be most effective for American Indian children. The author believes that the responsibility for such developments and changes lies directly with the LEA's and especially the communities that would be directly affected by them. Robertson's introductory quote (1978) clearly expresses this opinion:

> ...(we believe) that education is the way to self-determination and self-sufficiency as a government and as a people; education of our children and people is the number one priority for our tribal government. (p.1)
>
> Alfred "Tig" Pemberton
> Chairman, Education Committee
> Minnesota Chippewa Tribe
> February, 1978

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